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Moments in History

Commemorating Women's Role in Canadian History



Ontario
Women's
Directorate

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The third in a series.

International Women's Day — March 8th

On August 26, 1910 at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen, Denmark, Clara Zetkin, the German socialist champion of the rights of women, proposed that a day be set aside each year as International Women's Day. One hundred women from 17 countries voted to support her resolution.

The women said that having an International Women's Day drew attention to the social, economic, and political injustices to which they were subjected and that it was just the most recent step in their fight against the double exploitation they suffered as women and factory workers.

The Beginning of the Struggle

Women's efforts to draw attention to workplace issues date back to the 1800s. In 1857, women working in the New York garment industry staged a massive demonstration against 12-hour working days, lack of benefits, sexual harassment,

sexual assault on the job, and unfair wages.

The women walked off their jobs again in 1908 repeating their demands. This time, they also called for laws against child labour and they wanted the vote.

Their demands went largely ignored.

Then on March 25, 1911, the Asch Building, which housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street in New York City, burst into flames killing 145 women.

The mostly immigrant women who died in the fire worked in abominable conditions. The floors were littered with

flammable materials. There were no sprinkler systems. The few fire escapes that existed were unsafe. The doors opened the wrong way and led to narrow dark stairwells. Many were locked to ensure that none of the women would be able to slip out, even for a moment's break, without their employer knowing.

On investigating the fire, authorities claimed that this building was no worse than most others, indeed, far superior to some of the 1,463 such sweatshops in existence in the city.

But New York's Fire Commissioner, who testified before the State Factory Investigating Commission said: "I think that a great many of the fire escapes in buildings today are only put up to be called 'a fire escape.' They are absolutely inadequate and absolutely useless."

The theme for the first International Women's Day in 1911 was "International Female Suffrage." Over the years, the themes have evolved to reflect the diversity of the women's community, women's changing roles and continuing struggle. This year, the theme is "No time to stop...Our struggle must continue."

**In 1975, the United Nations formally proclaimed
March 8th International Women's Day**

Eighty thousand workers marched through a drenching rain to attend the mass funeral for the women who perished in the fire, while an estimated quarter of a million people watched silently. And still nothing changed.

Again, on January 11, 1912, textile workers numbering 14,000 went out on strike for better wages and working conditions. With the cry of, "Better to starve fighting than starve working," the women stayed out for nearly three months. Their courage inspired the song that has since become the anthem of the women's movement "Bread and Roses." "Bread" symbolizes economic security; "roses" stand for a better life.

The Canadian Experience

Similar issues existed in Canada. Speaking about wages and women's suffrage in 1893, Ontario's Minister of Agriculture at the time, John Dryden, expressed the prevailing sentiments of the day when he said, "...this same lady tells us that women do not receive equal pay with men for equally good work. How can the ballot correct this? Can you compel by law the payment of a higher scale of wages? So long as women are willing and anxious to work for a lesser wage than men, so long will they be paid less."

There were 1,078 unions in Canada as early as 1902. However, women remained, for the most part, unorganized and unprotected. The fact that women had to work was considered a "social crisis." People felt

a woman belonged in the home and that a man should provide for her. Women's work was largely unskilled and so, entirely dispensable.

Unskilled women workers had little leverage or protection against employers. They could be, and were, replaced by other unskilled labour at the whim of their employers at very little cost.

Between 1901 and 1921 there were 287 strikes for better working conditions and a living wage in Montreal alone. In 115 of these strikes, the workers' demands were entirely rejected and often, the strikers were fired and scab labour hired to replace them.

Employers were particularly hostile to women trying to organize. They saw a unionized workforce of women as an end to a ready supply of cheap labour. Established unions offered little support to women. Despite worker solidarity and policies supporting equal pay, unions often bargained lower increases for poorly paid women workers.

Progress Was Slow

It would take many more years for North American women to achieve some of their demands. Here are some significant landmarks in their struggle for workplace equity:

- Between 1913 and 1929 Canada enacted various pieces of legislation prohibiting child labour.
- Canadian women were given the suffrage to vote in national elections in 1918.

- By the mid-1940s, the average working day had dropped to eight hours.
- Women in Ontario were given equal pay for equal work in 1951.
- Maternity leave was legislated in Canada in 1970.
- The Ontario Human Rights Code was amended to prohibit sexual harassment in 1982.
- Equal pay for work of equal value was legislated in Ontario in 1988.

And yet today, women still have a long way to go before they achieve equality in the workplace:

- In 1990, 60% of all (both full-time and part-time) working women in Ontario earned less than \$20,000.
- Average 1991 earnings of women working full-time, full-year, amounted to 70% of men's earnings.
- Women remain clustered in low-paying jobs, often offering little, or no, opportunity for advancement.
- One out of every five women working in Ontario in 1986 worked in a clerical, sales, or service job.
- Women in Ontario made up only 18% of upper-level management in 1986.
- Although union membership can help women secure higher wages, more benefits and increased job protection, only 22% of the female labour force was unionized in 1987.



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